

# *The Comparative Politics of Climate Change Policy*

**Robert O. Keohane**

**2016 Balzan Prize for International Relations: History and Theory**

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**Affiliated Institutions:** Princeton University; Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences (CASBS), Stanford University

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## **The Project: General Outline**

Climate change is one of the most important long-term problems facing the world as a whole, but social scientists do not know as much as they should about the conditions under which governments take it seriously, and what leads them to pursue one set of policies or another. Moreover, a satisfactory understanding is lacking as to why some other organizations – provinces, cities, or corporations, for example – adopt pro-active climate change or energy policies while others do not. This project seeks to develop systematic knowledge about the sources of variation in climate policies and outcomes, and to galvanize a neglected field of political science: *the comparative politics of climate change policy*. Motivated and funded by Keohane's Balzan Foundation Prize in International Relations: History and Theory (2016, awarded 2017), the project is being conducted under the auspices of the Social Science Research Council Working Group on Climate Change and the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, Stanford University, with administrative support from Princeton University.

Designed to be *non-hierarchical and collaborative*, Keohane's role is to convene a group of scholars working on climate change and/or comparative politics; set the agenda for the initial meeting; offer advice and guidance to the scientific investigators; and decide which projects that emerge should be funded and at what level. The investigators will have constructed their own theories and hypotheses, and will use methods that they find appropriate, as long as they are social scientific and comparative. They will publish their work under their own names and with collaborators of their own choosing. They will also commit to freely sharing their ideas and findings with other members of the research group.

Although guided by theory, the project is also deeply empirical. It is *evidence-based social science*, conducted according to scientific principles that require specification of theory, deriving the observable implications of theory, specifying hypotheses that embody these observable implications, and testing the hypotheses with relevant data, which may be qualitative as well as quantitative.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, while motivations are to a great extent normative, the research itself is positive, and could involve any kind of social scientific method, ranging from agent-based simulations to experimental work, statistical modelling and data analysis, comparative case studies, and ethnography.

### **The CASBS Workshop**

As a first step, a workshop was convened at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, Stanford University, on April 19-21, 2018. The core group consisted of thirteen young scholars of comparative politics and/or climate change:

Sarah Bush (Temple University)  
Jared Finnegan (London School of Economics)  
Nikhar Gaikwad (Columbia University)  
Federica Genovese (Essex University)  
Jessica Green (New York University)  
Jennifer Hadden (University of Maryland)  
Thomas Hale (University of Oxford, *Deputy Supervisor*)  
Sol Hsiang (University of California, Berkeley)

<sup>1</sup> The principles to be followed are laid out in Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sydney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

Phillip Lipsky (Stanford)  
Paasha Mahdavi (Georgetown University)  
Florence Metz (ETH Zurich)  
Nick Obradovich (MIT)  
Dustin Tingley (Harvard University).

The following senior scholars participated in the meeting, offering commentary and advice:

Bruce Cain (Stanford University)  
Margaret Levi (Director, CASBS, and Stanford University)  
Michael Ross (UCLA)  
Ken Scheve (Stanford University)  
Michael Tomz (Stanford University)  
David G. Victor (UCSD).

In addition, Arjuna Dibley, a PhD student at Stanford, acted as secretary.

Memos and papers were circulated among group members before the workshop, at which there were no formal presentations. Extensive, intense discussions of the issues raised in the memos focused on how to initiate research that meets contemporary political science standards of descriptive and causal inference, while illuminating issues related to the comparative politics of climate change, in particular: issues related to uncertainty and risk; the distinctive problems of taking action on very long-term public policy issues; and the political barriers to fundamental political-economic changes such as those that would be involved in deep carbonization. Issues of complex interdependence in transnational and international climate politics were addressed, as were institutional variations among democracies that affect climate policies and outcomes and differences both between autocratic and democratic government actions with respect to climate change and among autocratic governments.

The following questions were discussed in great detail. Some of these questions emerged in different forms in the research projects devised in the course of the workshop; others remain for investigation in the future, or by others.

- What is the impact of institutional variation in democracy? This theme includes considering the following issues:

- Through what channels and under what conditions (for instance, of climate salience) do public attitudes on climate have an impact on climate outcomes?
- What are the motivations of democratic governments?
- How do policy outputs become policy outcomes?
- The impact of global interdependence on climate change policies, with reference especially to:
  - Roles of state and non-state actors, including sub-units of states and business firms, as well as NGOs.
  - Institutional competitive advantage, varying by unit depending on their capabilities and vulnerabilities.
  - How do transnational ties and transnational actors affect state policies?
- Distributional/re-distributional politics. Under what conditions do societies compensate losers? How relevant is the Coase Theorem, and how difficult is it to make commitments credible?
- Time horizons and discount rates. Which actors have long and short time horizons? Do these vary between firms or because of institutions? Research could examine asset revaluation, focusing on investors and insurance companies.
- Efforts to affect individual behaviour – under what conditions can long term changes in behaviour be induced?
- What ways are climate politics similar and different in democratic and authoritarian contexts? How do different types of authoritarian regime differ in their climate policies?
- Integrated assessment models. What assumptions of these models should be interrogated by political scientists? How can they be modified while keeping models tractable?
- Politics of decarbonisation. What can be learned by looking at previous disruptive transformations of major political economies in the past – such as the effects of the internal combustion engine – about the disruptions that would be associated with thorough decarbonisation?
- What is the difference for the politics of climate change between adaptation and mitigation?
- What is the impact of domestic accountability on diffusion of policy? Does accountability inhibit diffusion?

## Specific Research Plans

On the final day of the workshop three groups were formed, each of which outlined a specific research project on the comparative politics of climate change:

- 1) A comparative study of countries' responses to shocks (1973, Fukushima), focusing on the UK, France, Germany, and Japan. In general, under what conditions are rapid transitions observed? Increasing returns as a result of original government investment, then tipping points? Key issues here are time horizons – different actors will have different discount rates. Government may need to have the longest time horizons and the greatest tolerance for uncertainty. What are the drivers, and what are the blockers, of rapid and radical change? What are the democratic politics of massive initial investment by the state, then generating market incentives? Do the authoritarian politics of response to shock differ from the democratic politics of such responses? What are the factors that enable governments to maintain vigorous energy or climate policies over an extended period of time? Participants: Jared Finnegan (LSE), Phillip Lipsy (Stanford), Florence Metz (ETH, Zurich).
- 2) A comparison of oil majors' efforts toward reducing their carbon footprints, or even decarbonisation, seeking to explain variation among firms' actual (rather than symbolic) policies. Potential explanatory variables include the following: dependence of the firm on oil as opposed to gas or other energy sources; past history and organizational culture; location of headquarters; markets in which the firm sells its products; regulatory pressures and strategies in the past toward them; competitive situation; whether publicly traded; shareholder pressures; social movement pressures. Relevant frames: varieties of capitalism, pluralist theory; politics of regulation; work on corporate codes of conduct. Participants: Sarah Bush (Temple), Jennifer Hadden (University of Maryland); Thomas Hale (Blavatnik School, Oxford); Jessica Green (University of Toronto).
- 3) Survey experiments to look at how individuals in communities vulnerable to both climate and decarbonisation regulatory shocks (e.g. Louisiana delta oil drillers) address distributional issues and varying time horizons associated with choices among resistance, mitigation, adjustment, and adaptation options. Participants: Nikhar Gaitwad (Columbia); Federica Genovese (Essex); Paasha Mahdavi (Georgetown); Nick Obradovich (MIT); Dustin Tingley (Harvard).

These projects are currently defined in tentative ways and can be expected to be revised and to proceed in new directions as research proceeds. As is usual in innovative research, the list of participants for each project may also change. By 2020, the project is expected to produce publications improving our knowledge of the comparative politics of climate change policy and helping to institutionalize this subject as a sub-field of political science and an important component of climate change studies. Keohane will maintain close contact with each group, and a follow-up meeting at CASBS has already been arranged for 21-23 February 2019, with presentations of research designs and preliminary findings.